

# Punctuation

Skills Team, University of Hull

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- **Why** use it?
- A handy **list of punctuation marks** with examples of their use
- A rough guide to **commas**, their use and misuse
- The **colon**
- The **semi-colon**
- Avoiding **run-on sentences**

**Why** should you use punctuation in your writing? The simple answer is that it helps your reader – who is possibly also your marker - to understand your message easily. When you speak, you frequently pause, your voice rises or drops and often your face and hands add non-verbal information through “body language”; all this assists in communicating your message clearly. In writing you have to remember that the readers have only what is on the paper or screen in order to understand your message. Punctuation basically helps to indicate the pauses, rises and falls etc. which are important for understanding.

Different punctuation marks are used in different situations but all help with conveying your message with clarity. It is therefore essential, in academic writing in particular, to use punctuation accurately. Your tutors will expect this and you will lose marks for not doing so. On the other hand, correctly used punctuation can help to strengthen your arguments and improve marks. The alphabetic list below will introduce the main punctuation marks used in writing in general, not just academic writing . (If you need more detailed information, there is a separate leaflet on “Apostrophes” and commas, colons and semi-colons are covered in greater depth in this leaflet after the list.)

Punctuation mark	When to use it	For example
<b>Apostrophe ' </b>	<p>i) to show that something belongs to someone or something (possession)</p> <p>ii) to show letters are missing in words (omission)</p>	<p>The boy's book. This is Alec's pen. The students' names. The children's toys. <i>That means you use 's for singular and s' for plural unless the plural does <u>not</u> end in an s, as in the case of 'children'.</i></p> <p><i>Note: There is <u>no</u> apostrophe used with ours, yours, hers, his, whose, its (meaning belonging to us, you, her, him , who, or it )</i></p> <p><i>you're = you are; I'm = I am; it's = it is; who's = who is; don't = do not <b>BUT</b> remember that you <b>don't use short forms like 'don't' in academic writing.</b> Always use the <u>full forms</u> such as do not, who is, it is etc.</i></p>
<b>Brackets ( )</b>	<p>used in pairs around groups of words introducing an extra idea e.g. an explanation or afterthought to be kept separate from the rest of the sentence.</p> <p>A sentence should still make complete sense without the words in brackets.</p>	<p>He always hands in his work on time (he is a well organised student) after carefully checking it.</p>
<b>Capital letter A</b>	<p>i) at the beginning of a sentence</p> <p>ii) for names</p>	<p>Snow continued to fall. Finally a decision was taken to shut the campus.</p> <p>Alice Smith; Hull; The Bible; The Thames; The Midwifery Council</p>
<b>Colon :</b>  <b>(see below for more details)</b>	<p>i) to introduce something that is to follow, which may be a list</p> <p>ii) to introduce the second half of a sentence when it explains or expands on the first half</p>	<p>Students are expected to carry out a range of activities: attend lectures, take part in tutorials, produce written work, meet deadlines for assignments and sit examinations.</p> <p>Mediterranean cookery is considered healthy: it uses olive oil, fresh vegetables and fish.</p>

<p><b>Comma ,</b>  (see below for more details)</p>	<p>i) to mark a <b>brief</b> pause within a sentence, such as where you would naturally pause if you were speaking</p> <p>ii) to separate words in a list in a sentence (but do not put a comma before “and” or “or”)</p>	<p>We cannot help him, unless he comes to see us.</p> <p>The picnic included sandwiches, salad, crisps, cakes and fruit.</p>
<p><b>Dash –</b></p>	<p>i) to create a pause for dramatic effect, introducing something surprising or unexpected</p> <p>ii) used in pairs in a similar way to brackets</p>	<p>I looked at the mark for my last essay and it was – a first.</p> <p>I hear she’s a good pianist – I myself have never heard her – but she’s shy about playing in public.</p>
<p><b>Exclamation Mark !</b></p>	<p>at the end of an exclamation – an expression of emotion such as surprise, anger, delight etc.</p>	<p>It’s just amazing! Hurry up!</p> <p><b>BUT</b> since academic writing should be impersonal and objective, not emotional, <b>you will not be likely to use exclamation marks in your academic work</b></p>
<p><b>Full stop .</b></p>	<p>i) at the end of a sentence</p> <p>ii) to show an abbreviation (shortening)</p>	<p>She finally found the correct book.</p> <p>etc. e.g. Mr. B.B.C.</p>
<p><b>Hyphen -</b></p>	<p>to join two words together to make a compound word</p>	<p>Take-away, full-time</p>
<p><b>Question mark ?</b></p>	<p>at the end of a sentence which asks a direct question</p>	<p>How did this happen? Where is the Language Learning Centre?</p>
<p><b>Quotation marks (also called speech marks or inverted commas) “ ” or ‘ ’</b></p>	<p>i) to show that you are using someone else’s words</p> <p>ii) around words actually spoken</p> <p>iii) around titles of books, films etc.</p>	<p>Brown (2009) says “This indicates that the data should not be trusted.”</p> <p>“Hello”, she said.</p> <p>“The Tempest” is a play by William Shakespeare.</p>
<p><b>Semi-colon ;</b> (see below for more details)</p>	<p>i) to link two sentences and turn them into a single sentence when a full stop would be too abrupt</p>	<p>He never took any exercise; consequently he became very unfit. The door burst open; a stranger walked in.</p>

## Commas

As a rough guide for checking your punctuation, if you read your work aloud, where you make a major pause to draw breath (and possibly hear your voice go down in tone) you need to use a full stop, not a comma. This marks the end of a sentence. (Some sentences can be very short, even in academic writing.) Where you pause briefly, use a comma. However, this is only an indication of where to use commas; there is often disagreement about how many should be used. It may be a matter of personal taste. In some cases, though, the use – or lack of use - can be important. For example “The man who was in bed 5 has been discharged” lets the reader know which particular man was discharged- *the one who was in bed 5*. It “defines” the man and no commas should be used. (Writing “The man has been discharged” would probably prompt the question “Which man?”) In contrast, in the following sentence commas are needed to indicate additional details which are not used to identify the person: “The lady in bed 3, whose grandson visited this morning, needs to have a fresh jug of water”. Here, you can leave out the words between the brackets and you still know exactly who needs the water.

There is, though, a **possible problem with commas**. They can be used incorrectly.

It is a very common error to use a comma where a full-stop, conjunction, (“joining word”) or semi-colon is required, for example

*Nursing Studies students spend time on campus, they also have regular work-placements.*

The problem here is something called a “comma splice” but this is not a term you need to remember. What you do need to remember is that if both parts of the sentence can be used on their own, (they are “independent clauses”), it is wrong to connect them with a comma. Instead you can write **two shorter sentences**, as follows.

1) *Nursing Studies students spend time on campus. They also have regular work-placements.*

Alternatively you can join the two parts with a suitable **conjunction** (“joining word”).

2) *Nursing Studies students spend time on campus **but** they also have regular work-placements.*

The third possibility is to use a semi-colon, which is explained more fully in a section below.

3) *Nursing Studies students spend time on campus; they also have regular work-placements.*

If when you read through your work you find that you have a sentence with a comma in the middle, it is worth stopping to think whether the two parts of the sentence make sense on their own. If they do, you need to change the punctuation, using one of the 3 methods shown above.

You can test your understanding of avoiding comma splices with the following exercise.

[http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar\\_tutorial/page\\_47.htm](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/page_47.htm)

### **Colons**

Colons can easily be misused but if used properly can be very helpful in your writing. They have a range of uses; the two main ones are explained below.

A) To introduce a list ( as mentioned in the table above)

The problem is that not all lists need to be introduced by a colon.

What you need to remember is that the clause (group of words containing a verb) that comes before the colon **must make sense on its own**. Compare the two sentences below.

- 1) *Students are expected to carry out a range of activities: attend lectures, take part in tutorials, produce written work, meet deadlines for assignments and sit examinations.*
- 2) *Students are expected to arrive on time for classes and lectures, to work independently, to keep appointments, to be considerate to others and to the environment.*

In the first sentence, “Students are expected to carry out a range of activities” makes perfect sense. It is therefore correct to use a colon before the list. In the second one, “Students are expected to” does not make sense. Something is clearly missing. This means that no colon is needed and it would be incorrect to use one before the list. So if you have a list, remember you only use a colon before it if the list follows a clause that could be used on its own.

B) To introduce the second half of a sentence when it explains or expands on the first half

It can be seen as an invitation for the reader to continue reading about an idea. In the sentence below, the main idea is that the British diet is often not as healthy as it should be. After the colon, the reader finds an explanation of why this is the case.

*The average British diet is often considered unhealthy: it tends to contain too many fried foods, too many ready prepared foods with a high salt content and not enough fresh vegetables*

As in the case of the list (usage A), the words before the colon make sense on their own. What follows the colon is additional information. If the first part of the sentence cannot be used alone, do not use a colon.

One minor complication is the question of whether or not to use a **capital letter** to start the word following the colon. If the explanation after the colon contains more than a single sentence you *should* use a capital.

*Mediterranean cookery is considered healthy: It uses olive oil, fresh vegetables and fish. It often also includes a moderate amount of wine and avoids the use of butter.*

If the words following the colon are a **quotation**, again a capital letter needs to be used for the first word after the colon.

*The advice given by the Skills Team on research proposals aims to be reassuring: “**W**riting a research proposal is like any other form of writing.”*

In other cases, the best advice is probably to be consistent. Either always use a capital or always use a lower case letter after the colon. If in doubt, you could perhaps check whether your tutor has a strong preference and be guided accordingly!

### **Semi-colons**

You’ll be pleased to learn that semi-colons are both extremely useful *and* easy to use!

Some **lists** are complicated and using semi-colons makes them much easier for the reader to understand. (Always remembering to **help your reader** is so important.)

Generally you need use only a comma to separate items in a list but in lists like the one below, A), commas are not enough.

A) *When she conducted her research she travelled to Selby, Yorkshire, Peterborough, Lincolnshire, Newcastle, Northumbria, Carlisle, Cumbria and Buxton, Derbyshire.*

Adding semi-colons makes the following sentence, B), much easier to read and understand.

A) *When she conducted her research she travelled to Selby, Yorkshire; Peterborough, Lincolnshire; Newcastle, Northumbria; Carlisle, Cumbria and Buxton, Derbyshire.*

Semicolons are also used to **link** two closely-related clauses (groups of words with a verb) which could stand on their own. For example,

B) *I always park in the Salmon Grove car-park. It’s not far from my office.*

In this case there are two, separate sentences.

The two separate sentences could be separated by a semi-colon as there is a very close link between them.

C) *I always park in the Salmon Grove car-park; it's not far from my office.*

It would also be possible to link the two sentences with a **conjunction** or “joining-word”. In this case, there is **no** semi-colon.

D) *I always park in the Salmon Grove car-park **because** it's not far from my office **OR** I always park in the Salmon Grove car-park **since** it's not far from my office.*

When using a semicolon to connect two clauses, remember that each clause has to make sense on its own! If it does not, you cannot use a semicolon.

You can test your understanding of punctuating lists with this exercise:

[http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar\\_tutorial/page\\_04.htm](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/page_04.htm)

### **Run-on sentences**

What are “run-on” sentences? Run-on sentences are two sentences which have been written as one single one. They should always be avoided although they are often not picked up by “grammar checkers”. In many ways it is all too easy to write run-on sentences when you are keen to put down your ideas on paper when working on an essay! Therefore, when you proofread your work, be sure to check that you do not have two ideas in a single sentence. Below are some examples of “run-on” sentences.

*Sometimes the pupils misunderstand the instructions given by the teacher they do not listen carefully enough.*

*The secretary hurried into her office she needed to phone the tutor immediately.*

*I read a fascinating book on the birds of Australia it had wonderful illustrations.*

You can simply change a “run-on” sentence into **two shorter sentences**. (Don't be frightened of writing short sentences in your academic work. They can add clarity.)

*The secretary hurried into her office. **She** needed to phone the tutor immediately.*

You can use a **semi-colon** to join the two sentences and show the link between them.

*The secretary hurried into her office; she needed to phone the tutor immediately.*

To make the link even clearer, you could use a **conjunction**.

*The secretary hurried into her office **as** she needed to phone the tutor immediately.*

What you should never do is leave a run-on sentence in your work. If you have time, try identifying the “run-on” sentences in the following exercise.

[http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar\\_tutorial/page\\_37.htm](http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/exercises/grammar/grammar_tutorial/page_37.htm)

Finally, remember that correct punctuation is important. Take note of the punctuation used in the books and journals you read, take time to proofread your work (if necessary see the Study Guide on Proofreading on our website(<http://libguides.hull.ac.uk/skills>); checking punctuation is part of the proofreading process) and if you make any mistakes in your punctuation, learn from them!

Thanks are given to the University of Bristol for their kind permission to include the web exercises.

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Written by Judy Jowers

The information in this leaflet can be made available in an alternative format on request – email [skills@hull.ac.uk](mailto:skills@hull.ac.uk)